United Nations ECE/CES/2015/19

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
27 March 2015

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Sixty-third plenary session
Geneva, 15-17 June 2015
Item 3 of the provisional agenda
Response by official statistics to the Sustainable Development Goals

The role of national statistical offices pertaining to measuring sustainable development

Note by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), Mexico

Summary

The paper introduces the experience of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico in dealing with Millennium Development Goals and indicators, and then further with the setting up of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the related Sustainable Development Goals. The paper discusses the role of the international statistical system and that of the national statistical office in moderating the work on the Sustainable Development Goals and indicators.

The paper is presented for discussion to the Conference of European Statisticians' first session of the seminar "Response by official statistics to the Sustainable Development Goals".

GE.15-06617 (E)

1506617

Please recycle

I. Introduction

1. When the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and indicators were defined, few people in the world knew what they were about, and fewer people were interested. Moreover, it may be that even some governments that had endorsed the Millennium Declaration stopped paying attention even before the initial 48 MDG indicators were published.

2. Unlike the Millennium Declaration, the new agenda, still known as the Post-2015 Development Agenda, has aroused much interest among the various stakeholders. The countries decided that this new process should be bottom-up. In recent years, there have been many studies, meetings, consultations, assessments and intensive negotiations among various public and private actors, academia, civil society and international organizations, to delineate that agenda and to give it a universal and aspirational character. One important actor in this process is the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whose proposal has been the basis of the current negotiations. This will be the global agenda to which all Member Countries of the United Nations will be committed.

3. Recognizing the results and advances that were obtained with MDGs, it is clear that there are still many unresolved issues. Therefore, the Post-2015 Agenda has focused on sustainable development and has taken up issues that did not have sufficient visibility in MDGs, such as equity, inclusive society and economy, climate change, among others. The Post-2015 Agenda is also addressing new issues, such as human rights, good governance and justice. Similarly, it considers other dimensions of social progress, beyond material living conditions.

4. At the same time, the world has seen a rapid development of information technology and communications offering new possibilities to verify the extent to which progress is being made in meeting the new goals and targets. The Data Revolution provides a new tool for monitoring the new global development agenda. It involves not only the use of new data sources, but also the actions for capacity building for tracking targets and goals and the principles of transparency and open data.

II. The statistical community

5. The expectations to national statistical systems are mainly derived from the governments as users of data for policy making, but also increasingly from the civil society through observatories to follow up particular phenomena such as the evolution of maternal mortality, inequality, poverty, or the gaps in access to the information technologies, etc.

6. The experience in dealing with MDGs and indicators has had a positive effect on many users of official statistics, and has raised their expectations to the deliverables from national statistical offices (NSOs) for monitoring the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

7. To meet the upcoming expectations, NSOs should start working on several fronts: first, with the coordination of the statistical system and, second, with the quality of statistics. NSOs, as heads of national statistical systems, should establish a general framework to assure the quality of data and indicators to be provided for monitoring the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Third, NSOs should engage in innovative use of data sources, new methodologies for data modelling and building human capabilities through acquiring new skills and knowledge. It will be important to establish sustainable partnerships with the private sector and the academia, since the monitoring will require also their expertise to ensure proper use of new data sources. These partnerships are to be based on very concrete road maps leading to the production of data that are complementary to official statistics. Fourth, surveys will still be important, and in countries where surveys are

irregular or non-existent, resources should be assigned to establish, strengthen and sustain survey programs, both to households and to establishments.

8. For NSOs to be able to coordinate the statistical system and play the role of a leader of official statistics in the country, there should be a two-way engagement with the government: first, to obtain the highest political support for the statistical activity while at the same time maintaining their professional independence; and second, the delivery from the statistical office of high quality, timely data and indicators.

9. The Data Revolution needs to go beyond the statistical community and be a part of the countries' national debate concerning the development agenda of the next decades. The debate would include public and private players, national agencies and international organizations, as well as the civil society, and the aim should be to put in place a national statistical system that rises to the expectations of society.

10. The political process currently proposes 17 SDGs and 169 targets for monitoring, and countries have shown great interest in preparing for the monitoring work. Countries want to be sure that a clear, objective and timely measurement is made for each goal. In other words, the political process to agree on the final Development Agenda includes the technical decisions that should be taken by the international statistical community. This situation has put the official statistics, globally and nationally, in a position of high visibility, with high expectations and great responsibility.

11. It should be emphasized that in this process, the statistical community is not involved in policy decisions, particularly in the definition of objectives and targets. However, it is in a position to offer technical advice to arrive to a set of indicators that allows better monitoring and clearly communicates to society how progress is made in achieving the goals and targets.

III. National statistical offices

12. What is the role of national statistical offices in the development and monitoring of the Post-2015 Development Agenda?

13. At the time when MDG indicators were defined, statistical offices mainly from developing countries were not involved in the processes, led by national authorities. In some countries the statistical office was included in the monitoring work, but only with marginal participation.

14. One reason might be that some of these statistical offices lacked the knowledge, resources and ability to produce or integrate data that was often generated in other departments. They did not have the technical authority to guide the monitoring process. In addition, in some cases the statistical office was not strong enough to bring to the table other producers of information and guide the application of technical standards and norms.

15. A statistical office needs to show leadership in different fields of official statistics to play an active role in the collection, production and dissemination of data, and to maintain a position of active dialogue with decision makers. This leadership has to be shown from the strengthening of traditional statistical production programs all the way to methodological innovation and application of new tools for using and communicating information. The upcoming monitoring work might be an occasion for some statistical offices to improve their national standing.

IV. Activities in Mexico

A. Coordination

16. Considering the wide range of topics to be covered by the SDGs and targets, it is important to strengthen the coordination capacity of statistical offices.

17. One element needed to strengthen coordination is the capacity of the statistical offices to issue and monitor standards and recommendations for the generation and integration of statistics; another is the capacity to summon the members of the national statistical system to act in line with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and best practices in statistics.

18. In the case of Mexico, although reports for the monitoring of MDGs were published both in 2005 and 2006, it was not until 2010 that a coordination committee was established by INEGI in accordance with the provisions of the Law of the National System of Statistical and Geographic Information (SNIEG). This law clearly defines authority and responsibilities to develop and implement work programs for the integration of the MDG indicators, review the quality attributes of statistics and indicators, and present the results publicly.

19. In Mexico, a coordination committee was formed as a result of a decision of the statistical authority in collaboration with the government. During the formation of the committee, it was decided that the chair would be the Office of the Presidency of the Republic (OPR) given the crosscutting nature of MDGs. INEGI participated as technical secretary with the responsibility of reviewing the data sources, methods, indicators and the integration of metadata and provision of a website to disseminate the information. The committee is composed of the heads of statistical divisions of line ministries and other relevant government agencies. This coordination mechanism has also served in the move towards the Post-2015 Development Agenda benefiting from the synergies created during the last five years.

20. The fundamental questions during the planning of the Post-2015 Development Agenda were: How can we lead the national debate on sustainable development? What contribution can be made to the discussion of the Post-2015 Development Agenda at the international level, and how can we insert ourselves into this global debate?

21. Considering the thematic scope of the Post-2015 Agenda, the first action was to broaden the participation in the committee by incorporating new actors that now have direct responsibility towards public policy and monitoring.

22. OPR organized a worksnop in February 2014 on public policy and inclusive economic and social development. Representatives of international organizations, civil society organizations, the academia and government ministries participated in the workshop to share their views on social and economic inclusion in order to address the structural causes of poverty, exclusion and inequality.

23. This workshop resulted in a first list of indicators linked to social and economic inclusion. The list contained 270 possible indicators. In successive analyses those indicators were mapped to existing proposals at the international level, such as MDGs and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network's suggested list. These indicators were proposed as a first possible set of indicators for monitoring social inclusion.

24. While the government of Mexico has actively participated in the Open Working Group and other forums, a statistical pilot test is being organized by OPR, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNDP and INEGI. This exercise is called "Project for defining social inclusion indicators for the Post-2015 Development Agenda" and its objective is to develop

a conceptual framework for social inclusion as the foundation of the definition of relevant indicators. The participants for this meeting are members of the committee, INEGI, the academia and UN agencies in Mexico.

B. Relationship between public policy and official statistics: understanding

25. One issue that has been addressed in different forums is the relationship between those who take public policy decisions and those responsible for the statistical measurement. From the official statisticians' point of view, the basis of the relationship with decision makers is to listen, understand and grasp their information needs while maintaining professional independence regarding how to produce these statistics. The good relationship between politicians and statisticians requires building of understanding and a two-way communication.

26. For example, the negative assessment on the feasibility of an indicator might be perceived and interpreted by the decision-maker as a rejection, not of the indicator itself, but of its proposed policy. Similarly, those who are in the public policy arena may request indicators without much or any consideration on the availability, quality and sustainability of the basic data needed.

27. For INEGI it has been essential first, to understand the government's information needs, as the main user; second, to explain very clearly what can be done and what cannot be done and with what time horizon and regularity data can be provided. The programming of statistical activities aligned with the National Development Plan seeks to ensure good communication between both parties.

C. Review the information sources

28. In Mexico, administrative records are the least developed data source. Thus, in the process of integrating and reviewing MDG indicators one lesson is that government agencies must conduct with statistical rigor when working with administrative data. This is important because a substantial set of SDG indicators may be calculated from administrative records.

29. The behaviour of the indicators over time and their correlations with other indicators have been valuable to ensuring the quality. Confronting different data sources for the same topic has been very helpful. For example, the methodological analysis of a particular indicator of water, produced by one agency, found the indicator methodology to be weak, so that indicator was rejected and replaced with another from a different source and agency.

30. A major challenge in the production of information is the breakdowns. The assessment of the list proposed by the United Nations Statistics Division shows that it is very demanding to provide the breakdowns for indicators that seek to identify segments of population to whom address adequate public measures. When the information comes from censuses or administrative records with total coverage, it will be relatively easy to generate these breakdowns. When data come from sample surveys, usually household surveys, the breakdowns will require large sample sizes and will probably be unsustainable due to the related costs. In such cases modelling could be an answer. Using statistical tools that offer the best possible estimates with existing data is a path that INEGI will be exploring.

D. New data sources and emerging issues

31. Another possible solution is the use of new data sources. INEGI has been working for over a year in data mining of social networks, especially Twitter. With new technology and statistical modelling tools we have produced interesting results on as different matters

such as subjective well-being, people's mobility and tourism, among other issues, using the Twitter database. While the work is still experimental, it is considered to have potential. INEGI has established a partnership with research centres in statistics, mathematics and computer science to explore these possibilities. Mexico also participates in several working groups that have been created by the United Nations Statistics Division. The World Bank and Mexico are co-chairs of the Task team on Big Data and SDGs.

32. As for emerging issues, human rights as well as government, public safety and justice, there are already institutionalized projects generating statistics and indicators in coordination with the respective authorities. In particular, one could mention the Government, Public Safety and Justice Censuses, which are conducted in collaboration among different agencies and federal, state and municipal authorities.

33. Additionally, INEGI recently began measuring subjective well-being in accordance to the recommendations developed by OECD. In January 2012, a module on self-reported subjective well-being was carried out as part of a national survey on household spending. In 2014, a similar module was conducted along with the national survey on income and expenditure which can generate information based on a geographical breakdown. Also, a smaller module on subjective well-being is conducted along with the survey on consumer confidence on a quarterly basis.

E. Promoting the use of information

34. For the SDG monitoring it is expected that our current web platform, through which we have published the Mexican Reports on MDGs progress, will be updated. It will include a major component of geographical disaggregation.

35. Probably one of the biggest challenges faced by any NSO is that more and more people will use official statistics. In Mexico it is a challenge as well. The strategy has aimed at harnessing the technological means available, specifically trying to meet the needs for different profiles of users. We are already using traditional media, such as mass radio and television communication, and this use needs to be expanded to new channels, such as social networks. Another approach is engaging in direct dialogue with students and teachers, the private sector and the organizations of the civil society.

V. Conclusions

36. The following recommendations can be made as a synthesis of the previous sections:

(a) Demonstrate technical leadership in the field of official statistics;

(b) Strengthen NSO's role as coordinator of the national statistical system, involving not only the government but also the private sector, the academia and civil society organizations;

(c) Establish coordination mechanisms promoting fluent communication and smooth understanding with the authorities responsible for public policies;

(d) Program statistical and geographical activities so that they are aligned with the government's national development priorities;

(e) Carry out research and innovate in the development and application of new methodologies in collaboration with the academia, further strengthen the capacity of the NSO's staff;

(f) Exploit the potential offered by the geographical information for the production and dissemination of statistical information;

(g) Strive for innovation in the application of new information technologies to better communicate statistical and geographical information;

(h) Investigate and explore the potential of new sources of data, including Big Data, in partnership with research centres.